

## School choice: What motivates parents

### Peter Beamish

Dean, Faculty of Education and Science, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW

### Peter Morey

Senior Lecturer, Coordinator, Business Distance Education Resource Centre, Faculty of Business, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW

#### Introduction

**The educational system in Australia today is radically different from the school systems of the past. As Mark Porter (2010), Chairman of the Independent schools Council of Australia writes:**

The expanding role of the federal government in school education and the sustained growth of the independent sector are major developments which have influenced the nature of schooling in this country. (p. 2)

“*Parents are motivated in their school choice by two main things: aspirations that they have for their children, and the anxieties they hold for them*”

**The rise of the independent sector has given parents choice when it comes to selecting a school for their children. This increase in choice has been accompanied by a change of focus in Australian education. There has been a move in two major policy directions, marketisation and school performance. Both of these policies can be seen through a lens of competition, choice, the increasing emphasis on accountability, value adding to the curriculum through the addition of extra curricular activities, and the move to make the consumers of education bear the costs (English, 2009).**

Parents have now become consumers in an educational market that has seen the rise of a new class of school, the new, non-government school characterised by non-denominational Christian values, reasonably inexpensive fee structures which includes many ‘value added’ and management by a board of directors (Campbell, 2005 ; McCarthy, 2007).

Although Christian communities have largely embraced Christian schools, these schools now find themselves operating in a more competitive space. With the large increase in the number of independent schools in Australia, it has become harder for schools to maintain their special character and distinctiveness from other

independent schools; especially in an era of open enrolments. Indeed today many Christian schools have similar enrolment patterns to other independent schools and offer similar curriculum choices. Some would even argue that the low fee Christian school sector has a certain homogeneity and that the ethos and value system of individual schools is not radically different to other Christian schools in this sector.

Surveys show that parents support independent schools for a wide range of reasons. Whether the reason is discipline, religious emphasis, teacher quality, values in tune with those of the home or a rigorous or well-rounded curriculum, parents consistently see independent schools as better than government schools in meeting their aspirations and the needs of their children (Donnelly, 2009).

Before considering what factors parents are looking for in schools for their children, it is important to understand what motivates parents and why they are choosing schools as they do. Parents are motivated in their school choice by two main things: the aspirations that they have for their children, and the anxieties they hold for them (Campbell, Proctor & Sherington, 2009). School choice is therefore a parental attempt to maximise aspirations and minimise anxieties associated with their children’s future. These decisions are made in a competitive market place (English, 2009) where school data on school performance is made public through websites such as the ‘My School’ website.

This study set out to explore the factors that influence parents’ choice of school for their children using a mixed methods approach. Parents with students attending Christian schools completed a total of 102 School Choice questionnaires, and 17 families with children in schools were interviewed. The analysis of the data generated two separate but interrelated reports. The first (reported in this article) investigates what motivates parents in the choice

of a school for their children, while the second report investigates factors parents are looking for in a school (to be published in the next edition of TEACH).

## Aspirations

So what do parents want for their children? Parents were quick to articulate their aspirations for their children. Each of the most frequently expressed aspirations are discussed below.

### Their children to fulfil their personal potential

During the interviews, all parents indicated that they wished their children could fulfil their personal potential and follow the career path of their choice. This was the strongest sentiment of any expressed during the interview process.

I want my children to be empowered through their education so they can be whoever they want to be.

I want my children to have freedom of choice so they can choose a passion or interest that they would like to follow. I hope that they can contribute to society as positive citizens of society and live in a way that adds value to whatever community they join.

To help their children achieve this, parents were expecting schools to provide a diversity of experiences in order to facilitate their children's development.

I want the school to maximise his personal potential. I want them to consider who he is, and what he is capable of...whatever that is. Whether it is academics or sport or music or all of them.

Parents were particularly keen that students reached their academic potential. Around half of the parents interviewed, with children in high school, linked academic performance with their children's ability to enter the workforce and follow their career of choice.

I want my child to academically succeed so that they can have decent jobs and be successful in whatever vocation they choose.

These comments relating to academic potential are also reflected in the results from the school choice questionnaire where parents were asked to list their top school characteristics. When ranked, characteristics like high level: quality of teaching, student support and care, opportunities for academically gifted students, academic quality, opportunities for academically struggling students, teacher competence in their field, and wide

curriculum choice, dominate the upper end of the list indicating that parents saw these characteristics as being most important.

A number of parents expressed concern about the academic performance of some Christian schools in their local region, and that this had heavily influenced their choice of school.

Academic results of schools are really important, particularly with respect to high school. Some Christian schools do not have a good reputation and generally have a poor level of academic performance. We would never consider sending our children to our local Christian School because of poor academic standards as evidenced in newspaper rankings and NAPLAN ranking on the MY School website.

Our local Christian school has the potential but is not fulfilling its potential. The subject selection is too narrow for us to seriously consider it as an option.

Our local Christian school offers very limited academic and extracurricular choices and this is a major problem.

The parents perceived that any local Christian school's poor performance could be attributed to a variety of reasons. These included a confused strategic direction for the school, poor performance of the Principal, a general lack of resources, and poor quality of teachers at the school due to high rates of teacher turn over and the employment of young teachers who do not have a lot of experience. These factors were perceived reasons and the current study has not conducted any research to determine the validity of these perceptions.

What is clear is that the academic performance of Christian schools is coming under increased scrutiny. The Australian Government position has encouraged this scrutiny and the My School website has placed school performance in the public domain. It would seem that there is an increasing number of parents who are accessing this data to inform their choice of school for their children.

The parents perceived their school of choice was one that provided their child with a diversity of experiences and enabled them to perform well academically. While some parents rated their local Christian school very highly, there was a large amount of variation and not all parents rated the local Christian school highly on its ability to help their child achieve their potential.

### Their children to be committed Christians

A clear majority of parents have aspirations for their children to be committed Christians.

“*What is clear is that the academic performance of Christian schools is coming under increased scrutiny.*”

His spiritual life would be foremost consideration. We want him to make his own choice about God in his life, and place a relationship with Jesus as a priority.

I want him to have a strong relationship with God and that he knows what God chooses for him not what I choose for him.

We want our children to know how much Jesus loves them and they develop their own personal relationship with Jesus and they end up serving Him in some special way.

It is interesting that only about one third of the parents interviewed expressed a desire for their children to remain within their denomination.

We want our children to be Christians, our denomination would be great but definitely Christian.

It may be that some of the parents felt that belonging in their denomination was implied when they articulated that they wanted their children to be Christians, however, the overall impression from the interviews was that parents would be happy for their children to be practising Christians in a range of faiths including their denomination.

Parents did not see the school as being solely responsible for the faith development of their children. Most parents expressed the opinion that the main responsibility for the faith development of their children rests with the home.

We don't have an expectation that the school is going to be the primary learning and teaching facility with respect to the spiritual development of our son because we believe that this is us. It is our responsibility. The school needs to be supportive but is not the primary means for that.

Various studies have identified that the home, school and church are the three institutions that impact the faith development of children (Hughes, 2007). When parents were asked to rank these institutions in order of importance to the faith development of children, all parents placed the home first.

Opinion was divided almost equally as to the position of the church and the school. Those parents who ranked the church second recognised that children started attending church from a young age and most had a good peer group at church that kept them focused on the church. These parents recognised the importance of belonging to a strong church community. Some parents however lamented the declining importance of the church in the lives of their children. Some put this down to

a lack of strategic direction in the youth activities in their area, and the fact that there did not seem to be as many activities as there once was for youth and often activities were poorly coordinated. Parents who had their children in Christian schools that were run by a denomination different to their own tended to nominate the church as the next most important influence on faith development after the family.

Parents who ranked the school next recognised that their children spent a significant amount of time at school, and were influenced by the dominant position that their teachers had in their lives as authority figures. Parents greatly appreciate the pastoral care offered by schools and the way that schools can work with children to nurture them and offer them counseling and guidance in a way that is not always possible in the home. For this reason a number of parents commented that they appreciated teachers that care and took the time to offer meaningful interaction with students.

I want the teachers in the school to be diligent enough and passionate enough to take on any kid, even if they are the troublemaker in the class.

One of my children was baptised early this year and the school and the chaplains at the school had a big influence on that decision.

Parents were particularly keen that the school reinforced the beliefs and values of the home.

We were looking for a school where the values of the home would be reinforced at the school.

This theme was repeated by about half of the interviewees and most parents saw this as a very important consideration when choosing a school for their children.

Some parents wanted their children to be socialised with other Christian children as this may draw their children to the church. Families reflected:

Friendship groups heavily influence Church attendance. If their friends are at church then my children will keep going.

Our son is at a Christian school. He is socialised with a group of boys where the general pull of the group is towards the church whereas when he was at his previous school he had a good group of friends but they were not generally taking him towards involvement with the Church.

We are concerned with the statistics concerning young people transitioning into adulthood and remaining passionate about church. For us this means that a Christian school is the school of choice for us.

**“The overall impression from the interviews was that parents would be happy for their children to be practising Christians in a range of faiths including their denomination”**

Other parents worried that the school influence may not always be positive as their children often socialised with other children at the school who come from other faith backgrounds or may not be Christian. This major issue will be discussed more under the section on the anxieties of parents.

Another set of parents felt that the Christianity presented at school did not always represent the faith tradition of the home, especially when the child was in a school run by a different denomination.

We have found that there is not much different in the spiritual content between various Christian schools. There are some doctrinal differences and these need to be recognised and managed. We find that the differences allow us to explore the grey areas with our children and are not a major issue and offer us real teachable moments.

Parents most often took one of three positions in terms of factors that are important in ensuring their children become committed Christians. Firstly, there is a group who see a significant role for the family, Church, and the church school. Secondly, there is a group that sees the family and the church as the significant factors. And, finally there is a group for whom it is the family that is the significant factor. For the latter two groups, this particular aspiration does not automatically point them to a Christian school, or if a Christian school, it does not have to be a school run by their denomination.

### **Their children to be happy now, and to develop significant self-efficacy and appropriate relationships**

The majority of parents want their children to have happy fulfilled lives. Many recognise that this is usually the product of many factors but feel that the school can make a significant contribution.

We want our children to be confident young people who believe in themselves. We want the school to give them guidance and for them to have teachers who care about them.

We want our children to have a happy life, be happy, be content.

We would like our kids to have a good family life, believe in God, and be happy with what they are doing.

Parents want their children to be nurtured by teachers and fellow students.

We wanted somewhere where he would feel nurtured and the teachers take a lot of interest in the kids.

The way the students treated each other was very important, even more so than academics.

In particular parents want children to be good decision makers, and have the intelligence and ability to make good decisions whether it be in connection with a career, a life partner, or God and build significant relationships with others.

The most important and most valuable for my children is relationships.

Parents saw that their children needed to develop into strong and confident young adults through their school experiences.

I want my children to become self confident, young adults who can make well-informed decisions and not follow just anybody else.

Strong independent adults who can think for themselves without following the crowd and have a strong relationship with God. I want them to have a strength of character.

### **Their children and their family to be part of the school community**

Several of the families interviewed indicated that they not only hoped that their children would form good friendships but they wished to be included as a family in the greater school community. Many of the families felt that they had been included in the primary school community, when their children attended primary school, and spoke highly of the experience.

The primary school our child attended is a very small school it provides a real sense of community. It is great.

Many of these families were involved in the parent teacher associations and contribute to the extra curricular program of the school.

Some families felt that having their children in Christian schools provided them with an opportunity to increase their friendship group. It gave them an opportunity to mix with other Christians.

Community is very important. We like the idea of being part of the community so we could meet people that were not part of our church community.

Having our children in a Christian school allowed us to get to know a lot of great Christian families.

These parents reported that they felt a great sense of belonging to the school community as they were included in a range of school based activities that were easily accessed as most families lived fairly close to their school.

***“I want my children to become self confident, young adults who can make well-informed decisions and not follow just anybody else”***

For these parents the school of their choice was one that provided an opportunity for them and their children to become part of a wider school community. It seems that this gives them a sense of belonging and contributing to the school program. There was a strong feeling that this had been their experience when their children were in primary schools but not always the case when their children were a secondary school.

In summary, parents are looking to schools to further the aspirations that they have for their children. In particular the present study revealed parents' main aspirations were for their children to fulfill their personal potential, to be committed Christians, to be happy now, and to develop significant self-efficacy and appropriate relationships, and further for both their children and themselves to be part of the school community.

## Anxieties

As well as being influenced by their aspirations for their children parents are also influenced by the anxieties they have for their children's future. When interviewed about school choice, many parents commented on a range of anxieties however there was a large degree of agreement across parental groups as indicated in the following discussion of each.

### *Their children may reject the church and be negatively influenced by the wrong peer group*

The greatest concern that parents have for their children, shared by over half of the parents interviewed, was keeping their children interested in Christianity and having them remain as active members in the church.

We are mainly concerned about involvement in the church and staying in the church.

Their spirituality is one of my main concerns. We don't want them to feel as if we have pressured them, but we want them to remain in the church.

The statistics from our church concerning young people transitioning into adulthood and remaining passionate about church are a worry.

Most parents expressed a concern that their children would only remain in the church if they had friends in the church. This was a particular concern for those parents who had children in high school.

The high school years concern me. A major issue is peer group influence.

The peer group is critical. Schools play a large role in determining peer group.

I am concerned about my children hanging around the wrong kids and the effect of peer pressure.

Parents, with their children in Christian schools, recognised that their children were building friendship circles that included a peer group inside and outside of the church.

The peer group of my children is a worry. The school my children attend is a problem as not all the kids are Christian.

Many of these parents were left relying on church based activities such as youth groups and service activities to facilitate the socialisation of their children in the church and the establishment of a peer group within the church.

It's the youth group, Pathfinders and Storm Co and remaining in touch and involved with some of the positive influences the church does have.

Its through extra curricular activities for students and service opportunities that students are provided with positive peer group opportunities.

It seems that for many parents, active participation in school and church events is the key to continuing engagement with the church.

Our child is involved in a leadership role in her school and gets involved in chapels and other school activities which help her to be highly focused on Church involvement.

Parents perceived that the school of choice was one that would highlight the importance of a Christian lifestyle and provide social interactions with other Christians. Parents were concerned that their children may be exposed to negative peer influences by socialising with children from different faith traditions. This raises the issue as to the composition of the student body for Christian schools. The results of this study have highlighted the conflict between the strategic use of the school as an evangelistic tool, where the enrolment of non-Christians is at times encouraged, and parents desire to have their children socialise with other children who are active in their church.

### *Their children may be exposed to bullying*

Nearly a quarter of the parents interviewed said that they were anxious about their children being bullied at school.

“  
**These results highlight the conflict between the strategic use of the school as an evangelistic tool, and parents' desire to have their children socialise with others who are active in their church**”

Our child had a bad experience being bullied for being a Christian in a Christian school, with a lot of the kids not being Christian. Moved her to another Christian school that had a strong stand against bullying.

Cyber bullying is a big thing.

Parents expect schools to take a strong stand against bullying and to protect students from bullies.

### Their children may make the wrong lifestyle choices

Parents were anxious over future choices that children would make. While some parents were confident that their children would do the right thing, others were not so sure. Of particular concern were life style choices that involve drugs, their career choice, and the life partner they would choose. They wanted schools to nurture, support and mentor children. They particularly appreciate the role of the school chaplain in this process.

Schools play an important role in mentoring children. We hope that the school offers Christian values in a life style way and as a set of rules that encourages greatness and not the boundaries. Counselling and chaplaincy plays a really important part.

Above all, parents are looking for schools to support the home position.

Schools play a part but they really should only be reflecting what we do at home. We can't expect schools to do it all. The home should be the dominant influence.

This study has provided more evidence that parents perceive that the school of choice is one that guides and mentors students in lifestyle choices that reflect the value system of the home.

In summary, parents are looking to schools to reduce the anxieties that they have for their children. In particular the present study revealed parents' main anxieties were that their children might reject the church, be negatively influenced by the wrong peer group, be exposed to bullying, and make the wrong lifestyle choices.

### Conclusion

This study has explored what motivates parents to choose a particular school for their children. All too often discussions on school choice are reduced to discussions of parents' preferred collections of isolated school characteristics. This reductionist view is often at the operational level, resulting in educators focusing on a limited set of operational

characteristics that are deemed to be important. This serves to limit the school choice discussion. Other educators default to perspectives that they 'grew up' with and fail to appreciate the full potential of a broader perspective. They often cling to views that may be nostalgic and familiar but fail to establish a contemporary understanding of parents' motivations. The possibilities for their schools are then limited to a narrow, often predefined, set of options.

Exploring a broader understanding offers stakeholders a different perspective. It can enlarge vision and allows educators to respond with a set of actions that are often more contemporary and mesh with parents expectations. There are benefits for schools and school systems in the adoption of a broader perspective.

Parents have numerous considerations in choosing a school. Rather than focusing on individual school characteristics, this component of the study has investigated the reasons behind the importance of these factors and explored what motivates parents in choosing a school for their children. It seeks to understand the reasons behind school choice. It found that most parents choose a school with whom they felt they could form a partnership to best *enhance the aspirations they have for their children and reduce the anxieties that they have about their children's future*. It is not one or two factors that significantly influence parents when making school choices, but rather there is an interplay between a range of factors that, in the minds of parents, will best enable their aspirations for their children to be achieved; at the same time limiting the negative experiences to which their children are exposed.

The logical consequence for schools is to think about the possible futures that families envisage for their children, and to take into account parents' motives including anxiety and aspiration. Rather than concentrating on developing isolated school characteristics to attract students, schools should adopt a more holistic approach to assure parents that their child will have a high probability chance of a good future, within a danger-reduction environment.

Parents want their perception of best for their children. They realise that their children's school plays an important role in their family's future. Parents have a choice of school for their children, and because their children are so important to them, they intended to exercise that choice. They are motivated by wanting to give their children a bright future, and in so doing, leave a lasting

“*Rather than concentrating on developing isolated school characteristics to attract students, schools should adopt a more holistic approach*”

# Research & Scholarship

legacy for their children and the people with whom their children interact. Schools need to recognise what drives parents and seek to offer them an environment where their shared aspirations and anxieties are adequately addressed. **TEACH**

## References

- Cahill, R. & Gray, J. (2010). Funding and secondary school choice In Australia: A historical consideration. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35, 1.
- Campbell, C. (2005). Changing school loyalties and the middle class: A reflection on the developing fate of state comprehensive high schooling. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 32(1), 3–34.
- Campbell, C., Proctor H., & Sherington, G. (2009). *School Choice*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

- Donnelly, K. (2010). *The Politics of School Choice*. <http://www.quadrant.org.au/magazine/issue/2009/7-8/the-politics-of-school-choice> retrieved Dec 2010
- English, R. (2009). Selling education through "Culture": Responses to the market by new non-government schools. *The Australian Educational Researcher*. 36(1), 89–104.
- Kidd, A. & Nicholls, D. (Eds) (1999), *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle class identity in Britain 1800–1940*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hughes P, (2007). *Putting life together: Findings from the Australian Youth Spirituality Research*. Victoria: Fairfield Press.
- McCarthy, A. (2007). Managing school choice. *Issues In Educational Research*, 17(2), 232–255.
- Porter, M. (2010). *Forty Years in Review* ISCA.